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SUBJECT: SUPPORT COUNCILS MAY IGNITE KIRKUK'S POWDER KEG

Classified By: KIRKUK PRT LEADER HOWARD KEEGAN FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) This is a PRT Kirkuk reporting cable.

SUMMARY

¶2. (C) On November 3, a delegation of Arab leaders from Kirkuk province met with PM Maliki in Baghdad to propose forming Tribal Support Councils (referred to as "Majlis Al Isnad") in Kirkuk province. Arab leaders claim the proposed Support Councils will be temporary unarmed advisors working closely with the Iraqi Police (IP) and the Government of Iraq (GOI), and will focus on reconciliation, development, and security. They claim that Support Councils could also help facilitate a deal to remove Kurdish security forces (Assayish and Peshmerga) from Kirkuk.

¶3. (C) Turkmen leaders cautiously favor the Councils as a counter to Kurdish power, but think they will be armed and fear they will provoke conflict between the Arabs and the Kurds. Kurdish leaders unequivocally oppose Support Councils, and claim Maliki is using them to gain influence in Kirkuk province. Support Councils have the potential to foment violent confrontation in the province. END SUMMARY.

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ARABS PRESENT SUPPORT COUNCIL IDEA TO PM MALIKI
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¶4. (C) On November 3, approximately 80 Sunni Arabs from Kirkuk province traveled to Baghdad to meet with Prime Minister (PM) Maliki. Sheikh Abu Saddam (aka Hussein Ali Salih), head of the Arab Unity Party, led the delegation, which included provincial political heavyweights such as Deputy Governor Rakan Saeed, and Arab tribal leaders such as Sheikh Burhan Al-Assi, also a Kirkuk PC member. The meeting took place on November 4. In it, Maliki and the Sunnis discussed forming GOI-sponsored Support Councils in Kirkuk province. By all accounts, this idea originated with Sheikh Burhan, and had the support of the entire Arab delegation.

ARABS SUPPORT UNARMED SUPPORT COUNCILS

¶5. (C) According to the Arab leadership in Kirkuk province, the Support Councils will be multi-ethnic, unarmed advisors. Each district and sub-district will be allotted one Council, which will report directly to the GOI on reconciliation, development, and security. The Councils will have a tribal flavor, and will work through tribal networks at the district and sub-district level.

¶6. (C) In a November 17 meeting with the PRT, Sheikh Abu Saddam expressed unequivocal support for the formation of Support Councils. He stated that they would be transitional, perhaps for three years, until reconciliation is complete in Kirkuk. He expected that they would report directly to the

Reconciliation Office in Baghdad, although they would also work closely with Iraqi Police (IP) in the province in an advisory role. In meetings with the PRT on November 17-18, Deputy Governor Rakan echoed almost verbatim the sentiments of Abu Saddam. Both claimed that no Support Council leaders had been identified.

¶7. (C) In a November 19 meeting with us, Sheikh Burhan admitted that he developed the idea of establishing Support Councils in Kirkuk. He was concerned that USG would oppose the idea and possibly detain him. Burhan insists that the Councils will be peaceful and unarmed. He pointed out that Kurds will also be represented in the Support Councils--although, he said, the Kurdish parties (PUK and KDP) will oppose this because they do not recognize Kurdish tribal leadership. He stated that one duty of the Support Councils will be to report on Kurdish Assayish (Kurdish party QCouncils will be to report on Kurdish Assayish (Kurdish party secret police for the PUK and KDP) actions. Burhan blamed the U.S. for working with the Assayish in Kirkuk even though they are "illegal security forces," not affiliated with the GOI. He said he was unsure if Support Councils would be necessary if all Assayish and Peshmerga were removed from Kirkuk province. Like Rakan and Abu Saddam, Burhan said the identity of Support Council leaders is undecided.

¶8. (C) The PRT met with Arab Kirkuk PC member Mohammed Khalil on November 16. Khalil stated that the Councils are necessary because the Assayish have free reign throughout the province. He believes that the Councils can be used as a bargaining chip with the Kurds to remove the Assayish and Peshmerga from Kirkuk province.

BAGHDAD 00003772 002 OF 003

KIRKUK TURKMEN CAUTIOUSLY SUPPORT SUPPORT COUNCILS

¶9. (C) Turkmen PC members gave the PRT no clear position on the issue of Support Councils in the province, but Turkmen leaders seem cautiously in favor of them. Turkmen PC member Najat Hussein (ISCI) said that the Support Councils may work, but should only exist for a limited period. He worried that Maliki would use the Support Councils to make inroads into the security forces of Kirkuk. Najat believes that a major point in favor of the Councils is that they will counterbalance the Assayish and Peshmerga in the province. He stated that the Assayish and Peshmerga presence in Kirkuk is illegal and not authorized by the Iraqi constitution. Najat primarily sees the Support Council issue as a point of contention between the Kurds and the Arabs.

¶10. (C) Turkmen PC members Majeed Izzat and Torhan Mudhir (both ITF) presented similar views. Both Majeed and Torhan believe that Support Councils could be useful in alleviating security problems caused by the Assayish and Peshmerga. Majeed believes the Councils should be temporary and active only until security improves. Both seemed to believe that the Councils would be armed. Turkmen PC member Tahseen Kahea feared that the Turkmen might be caught in the middle of a conflict between Arab Support Councils and Kurdish security forces.

¶11. (C) The PRT met with Deputy Chief of Police General Turhan Abdulrahman Yousif in Kirkuk on November 17 to discuss the Support Councils. General Turhan is a self-described independent Turkman, but is believed to be affiliated with the ITF. General Turhan thinks the Support Councils are a good idea so long as they remain unarmed. He sees them as assets for the Iraqi Police (IP), especially at the district and village level, where he thinks they will be most effective. Turhan told us that the IP have a difficult time in villages, especially where tribal influence trumps government; Support Councils could help to bridge this divide. Turhan said he had heard that possible Council

leaders were Sheikh Abu Saddam, Sheikh Abdullah Sami al-Assi, Sheikh Burhan, and other tribal leaders.

¶12. (C) General Turhan also commented in depth on the status of the Assayish in Kirkuk province. He puts the number of Assayish in the province at approximately 8,200, divided between the PUK (4,500) and KDP (3,700). Of the total, three to four thousand physically serve within the metropolitan area of Kirkuk city. He stated that he heard these numbers directly from "the sources" (alluding to the heads of the Assayish groups). He estimated that 60% of the current employees are indigenous to Kirkuk. The presence of these groups in the city is no secret, as their facilities are heavily barricaded, often flying the KRG flag and occupying public buildings. The Assayish are estimated to have 73 facilities throughout the city, which disturbs the other ethnic groups there.

¶13. (C) General Turhan complained that the IP have no control over the Assayish--in fact, he claimed he must go through Coalition Forces (CF) to address any issues involving the Assayish or Peshmerga. He referred to the Assayish as "illegal" and called them more of a threat to the province than Support Councils would be. He believes the Councils could help to contain the Assayish and maybe even lead to their removal from Kirkuk. Turhan predicted opposition to the Councils from many in the IP however, because IP members are loyal to the PUK and KDP rather than the GOI. Qare loyal to the PUK and KDP rather than the GOI.

KIRKUK'S KURDS VEHEMENTLY OPPOSE SUPPORT COUNCILS

¶14. (C) Kurdish leaders in Kirkuk province vehemently oppose the Support Councils idea. They are convinced that the Councils will be "armed militias," illegal under the Iraqi constitution. The leaders refer to any Kurd who is willing to participate in Councils as a "traitor." They also believe that the Councils are an attempt by Maliki to extend the influence of his party into Kirkuk.

¶15. (C) Opposition to forming Support Councils in Kirkuk was the first contentious topic PUK member and PC Chairman Rizgar Ali addressed in his November 10 meeting with Senior Advisor Krajewski. He believed there was no need for them in Kirkuk, and that "all local leaders agree" on this. He claimed the Constitution did not permit Maliki to create such a new force and called upon him to drop the idea, saying the resources to be devoted to them would be better spent on providing other public services. He claimed that Maliki planned to fill the Support Councils with Ba'athists and Kurds who had served Saddam Hussein.

BAGHDAD 00003772 003 OF 003

¶16. (C) In a November 18 meeting with the PRT, Mohammed Kamal (leading KDP PC member) asked why the GOI is willing to spend money on Support Councils when what Kirkuk really needs is more development projects. He answered his own question by stating that Maliki, and in turn Iran, is attempting to gain power in Kirkuk province. He warned that this is a very dangerous development for the Americans. The Kurds "refuse the Support Councils with all of our power" and "Support Councils are like playing with fire, and this fire will set off the powder keg." He denied the claim that Support Councils will be unarmed and said that, even if it were true in principle, the Councils would eventually obtain arms. Babakir Sidiq, a leading PUK PC member, echoed this view in a separate discussion. When asked if he thought the Support Councils were a reaction to the Assayish and Peshmerga in Kirkuk, Kamal claimed that there are no Peshmerga in Kirkuk, and the Assayish number only around 100, and are unarmed. He said the Assayish are in Kirkuk because CF want them there.

¶17. (C) Awat Mohammed, PC member from the Kurdistan Toolers

Party, met with the PRT to discuss the Support Council issue on November 19. Awat repeated many of Mohammed Kamal's points. He also referred to Kirkuk as a powder keg, with the Support Councils providing a possible lit fuse. He believes the Support Councils are either an attempt by Maliki to grab power in Kirkuk province or an attempt by the Arabs to remove the Assayish. He said that unarmed Support Councils might be more palatable, but does not believe that this is the Arabs' ultimate intent.

COMMENT

¶18. (C) As in other provinces, Prime Minister Maliki may be supporting Support Councils in Kirkuk province to increase his and his party's influence. Kirkuk's Sunni Arabs have eagerly embraced the idea as a counter to Kurdish power, and particularly to Kurdish security forces (Assayish and Peshmerga). It is possible that Kirkuk's Arab leadership is backing the Support Council idea in part so they will have something to trade on the Assayish issue when negotiations begin under the Article 23 framework (Provincial Elections Law). We are skeptical though that the Kurds would agree to such a trade or that PM Maliki would agree to disband the Support Councils if they did. In the complex security/political situation in Kirkuk, the Support Councils have the potential to evolve into an organized armed force identified with the interests of PM Maliki and Kirkuk's Sunni Arabs, even if they don't start out that way. They could thus could pose a risk to security and stability in the province. END COMMENT.
CROCKER